



NEWS RELEASE

Tories Appear Poised to Trade Places with Liberals Voters Opt to Give Stephen Harper a Chance

National Federal Voting Intentions (overall n=3,251)	
Conservative Party of Canada	37.1
Liberal Party of Canada	27.0
New Democratic Party	19.7
Bloc Québécois	11.2
Green Party	4.5

It appears that voters are collectively opting to give Stephen Harper a minority government to see if he can deliver to greater satisfaction than the Liberal minority government of 2004. As the campaign reaches the final weekend, our polling continues to find a good deal of volatility among voters and a majority Conservative government is still in play, but increasingly less likely. We have found the Liberals sinking over the past week in Quebec, but perhaps rebounding somewhat in Ontario.

“The crucial outstanding question is whether Ontario (and perhaps B.C.) voters currently in the NDP or enlarged undecided camps decide to defect to the Liberals as they did in the final weekend of the 2004 election,” said EKOS Research Associates President Frank Graves. “While the potential is still there, so far the NDP is hanging on to (and even enlarging) its support.”

“Although a Conservative victory may appear obvious today, it is important to note that there has been a breathtaking transformation of voter expectations and preferences in a very short time period. Only a couple of weeks ago most voters foresaw a Liberal victory,” said Graves. A number of key factors are coalescing to produce this remarkable result:

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- Regime fatigue and ethical baggage weighed down the Liberals seeking a fifth term.
- New ethics questions raised in middle of campaign had a very deleterious impact on Liberal fortunes.
- Stephen Harper and Conservatives designed and executed a masterful, gaffe-free campaign.
- Both the Tory platform and Stephen Harper effectively communicated a moderate centre-right approach that resonated with Canadian zeitgeist and aging demographics
- Voters ultimately saw Stephen Harper and the Conservatives as offering a more positive vision for the future than that offered by the Liberals.

“The real story here is largely one of demographics and the intersection of values and interests with some of Canada’s key groups of voters,” said Graves. Mr. Harper and the Conservatives have been able to both hold onto their traditional constituency while bolstering support among older voters, men and more affluent Canadians. This has propelled them to new heights.

They have accomplished this feat by appealing to both the interests and values of these voters. Campaign pledges like the capital gains provision hold great appeal for these groups and the Conservatives’ decency and security themes dovetail well with these voters’ concerns with corruption and crime. Factor in a moderate overall stance by the Conservatives which comforted Canadians that economic well-being would not be disrupted by an overly adventurous trajectory shift in national policy.

“The Conservatives have to be very pleased with the campaign they have run — although they may to some extent be ‘wasting’ popular support in Alberta and Quebec, with the final seat outcome being somewhat less dominant than the national popularity numbers might suggest,” said Graves.

Graves went on to suggest a glimmer of hope for the Liberals: “We’re not seeing the same degree of volatility that was evident going into the final weekend of the 2004 campaign, but there is the possibility that, if the Liberals can build on their recent rebound in Ontario, they may improve their fortunes greatly. NDP voters are among the most concerned with the prospect of a Conservative majority, and the possibility remains that the Liberals may be able to pull back some NDP voters. While frankly a long shot at this stage, this would offer the fairly intriguing scenario of a Liberal party winning the plurality of seats while not capturing the popular vote.”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“So Stephen Harper appears poised to receive a mandate from voters,” said Graves. “He has been selected as the right antidote to a soured national mood which saw a steep erosion in confidence in the federal government in recent years.” He will be assuming power at a time when Canadians acknowledge a profound sense of progress and economic security, but have been increasingly gloomy about whether these achievements would continue, much less be enjoyed by the next generation.

“Mr. Harper wrestled the championship of best positive vision for the future from Mr. Martin with a coherent, substantive and plausible agenda which resonated particularly well with the more economically secure portions of Canada,” said Graves. “The ‘black box’ of a hidden agenda became a ‘glass box’ filled with specific and credible policy initiatives.” Further, the renaissance of Conservatives in Quebec may help mitigate the implosion of the federal Liberals in that province and provides a federalist alternative not stained with the deep hostility towards the Liberals there.

“At the end of the day it seems that Stephen Harper has seen a long strange voyage, which began in the political wilderness, end successfully with something that (to Canadians) looks very much like the Progressive Conservatives who were sent packing over 12 years ago,” said Graves.

REGIONAL TRENDS

- *Ontario*: Liberals lost their lock on Ontario, except in Metro Toronto where they remain very strong. The Conservatives are doing very well in the South West, 905 and the East, but there strength in the 613 region has declined somewhat over the campaign. The NDP have usurped the North from the Liberals, rising from third to first choice in a matter of weeks.
- *Quebec*: The Conservatives main inroads outside the traditional federalist fortress on the West Island of Montreal began with an erosion of BQ support elsewhere in the province, but the surge in support continues province wide. The emergence of the Conservatives as the lead federalist party in Quebec is a dramatic shift, and one which may augur well for the clouded national outlook on unity.
- *B.C.*: This is the most hotly contested race in the country. It continues to be a turbulent 3-way race, with Tories tentatively moving ahead. The province may still be the final arbiter of how strongly the Conservatives finish.
- *Atlantic*: The Atlantic provinces have been leaning Liberal throughout the campaign, however, the Conservatives have made some inroads.
- *Alberta and Prairies*: Solidly Conservative.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

- Harper holds the trump cards: 1) Seniors (i.e. Canadians most likely to vote on Election Day), 2) upper socio-economic status groups, and 3) males.
- Younger Canadians (even the 35-45 cohort) are relatively disengaged from this campaign although there is some evidence that they may be coming late to the party. A Conservative majority scenario has caught their attention.
 - Issues important to this cohort (e.g., the environment, education, the economy, and U.S. foreign policy) have not been prominent in this campaign or seen through reverse prism.
 - Campaign has been more connected to the concerns of older Canadians (e.g., ethics, taxes, medical wait lists, defence, crime and justice, revisiting same-sex marriage and BMD).
- Interestingly, if it were up to voters under 25, the outcome of this election would be close three-way split, with the NDP winning.

METHODOLOGY

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted January 16-19, 2006 with a random sample of 3,251 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 1.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions).

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.

This research was conducted for the *Toronto Star*, *La Presse* and *Le Soleil*.